

Compton Basset
Upper Marlboro VICTORY
Prince Georges County
Maryland

HABS No. MD-134

HABS

MD.

17 MAR 1964

3.

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
Baltimore District

Historic American Buildings Survey

Prepared at Washington Office

Addendum To:
COMPTON BASSETT
(Clement Hill, V House)
16508 Marlboro Pike
Upper Marlboro
Prince George's County
Maryland

HABS NO. MD-134

HABS
MD
17-MARBLU,
3-

PHOTOGRAPHS AND
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

COMPTON BASSETT
(Clement Hill V, House)

HABS NO. MD-134

HABS
MD
17-MARBU.V
3-

Location: 16508 Marlboro Pike, Upper Marlboro, Prince George's County, Maryland

Present Owner: Mr. and Mrs. Robert Sasscer

Present Use: Private residence

Significance: Compton Bassett is one of the finest Georgian mansions in Prince George's County. It embodies the distinctive characteristics of Georgian architecture such as the central pedimented pavilion front with pilastered frontispiece, symmetry, hipped roof, palladian-like windows, and its center-hall plan, as well as its fine interior detailing.

Historically, this fine Georgian mansion reflects the prosperity of the tobacco growing plantation system on which Prince George's growth and economy was founded. Its Georgian plan was readily adapted by the wealthier planter and merchant class and is seen in other fine homes dating from this period. It is located only 1-1/2 miles from Upper Marlboro, the county seat (since 1721), and the heart of the richest tobacco growing in the county.

It is also significant as the home of the Hill family and its decendants since 1699. The Hills (and Sasscers) were prominent citizens of Prince George's County, serving the state and county government, and as physicians.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: Compton Bassett was built ca. 1783 to replace the original Hill family home, burned in 1771 (reconstruction was said to have been delayed by the Revolutionary War).

2. Original and subsequent owners: The following information came from Effie G. Bowie's Across the Years in Prince George's County (pgs. 426-443) unless otherwise cited.

COMPTON BASSETT
(Clement Hill V, House)
HABS NO. MD-134 (page 2)

- 1699 Clement Hill, Jr., acquired the property at Compton Bassett, surveyed to contain 748 acres
- 1743 Clement Hill, Jr., 's will leaves Compton Bassett to his wife, Ann Darnall Hill during her lifetime and then to their son, Clement Hill II.
- 1782 Clement Hill III's will leaves Compton Bassett to his only son and heir, Clement Hill IV
- 1807 Clement Hill IV's will leaves Compton Bassett to his wife, Eleanor Brent Hill during her lifetime and then to their son, Dr. William Hill
- 1823 Dr. William Hill's will leaves Compton Bassett to his wife, Anne Smith Hill, during her lifetime and then to their son, William Beanes Hill.
- 1890 Judge William Beanes Hill's will leaves Compton Bassett to the eldest daughter of he and his wife, Catherine Beall Smith, Esther G. Hill (Will, Administration #1413).
- 1900 Esther G. Hill's will leaves Compton Bassett to her niece, Mary Dixon Beall, later wife of Dr. Reverdy Sasscer (Will, Administration #1775).
- ? Compton Bassett to two sons, Henry S. and Robert B. Sasscer

4. Builder: The original Compton Bassett was built for Clement Hill, Jr., following his 1699 purchase of the property. This house burned in 1771, however, and was not rebuilt until after the Revolutionary War. The current house was built for Clement Hill IV ca. 1783. "A.L. Gosnell" was scratched into the plaster over the dormer on the southeast facade. He may have been involved in the construction of the house, but his role has not been determined.

5. Alterations and additions: In March of 1822 James Hoban, architect of the White House, was hired to make improvements to Compton Bassett. It was at this time hat

the pebbledash (or other plaster treatment underneath) was added to the exterior, presumably to cover burned bricks used in the reconstruction. A two-story kitchen wing was added to the northeast side of the house in 1928, replacing an earlier one-story frame kitchen wing. The original kitchen was located in the basement of the main block where the large cooking fireplace is still found. An entry porch was added to the south front, and a porch across the entire length of the main block at the north rear, by Reverdy Sasscer (after World War II).

B. Historical Context:

Compton Bassett is a product of the tobacco growing plantation system on which Prince George's early economy and growth were based. Until the Civil War, tobacco--grown on large plantations using slave labor--was by far the single greatest product of this agricultural county. Tobacco was so important to colonial Maryland that it was used as a medium of exchange. Because Prince George's became the largest tobacco-producing county in Maryland, plantations such as Compton Bassett formed the backbone of the county's economy and shaped the lifestyles of its inhabitants (both white and black).

Compton Bassett is located just outside the town of Upper Marlboro, the heart of the tobacco growing region and the site of one of seven original tobacco warehouses and inspection stations. It is located near the Patuxent River which formed the corridor of initial inhabitation for settlers migrating from Maryland's first settlements to the south. Thus, the region in which Compton Bassett is located is among the county's first settlements. In fact, Clement Hill, Jr., 's initial land grant came before the founding of Upper Marlboro in 1721. It was a thriving county seat by the time that Clement Hill IV erected the current residence.

Compton Bassett is among the finest late 18th-century Georgian homes constructed in Prince George's County. Residential structures of this size and refined styling were built by the county's elite society of wealthy planters. While most county residents were living in simple frame dwellings during this period, the few tobacco-planting families which held most of the land were erecting mansion houses. Thus, Compton Bassett represents a number of such plantation dwelling houses

built during this period. In fact, it resembles, among others, His Lordship's Kindness (HABS NO. MD-315). The builder of His Lordship's Kindness, Henry Darnall, was a nephew of Ann Darnall Hill, wife of Clement Hill, Jr. who first acquired the property, so that it undoubtedly influenced the design of Compton Bassett. Also of similar styling in Prince George's County are Mt. Lubentia and Pleasant Prospect.

Compton Bassett is unusual in that the property has been in the same family for nearly three centuries. It has been the homeplace of Clement Hill, Jr., and his descendants since 1699. Its inhabitants have been socially prominent citizens of the county, serving the church, state and the community, while engaged in agriculture. Clement Hill, Jr. arrived in Maryland in 1693. He was the nephew of Clement Hill, Sr., of St. Mary's County, a prominent government official who had come to Maryland in 1662 with Lord Baltimore. In 1696 he married Anne Darnall, daughter of Col. Henry Darnall of "The Woodyard," and in 1699 received an appointment as Surveyor General of the Western Shore. The same year he received the 748 acre Compton Bassett estate. He then began construction of his home (Bowie, p. 426-27).

Clement Hill, Jr., died in 1743 leaving Compton Bassett to his wife, during her lifetime, to be passed on to their son, Clement Hill III. He married Mary Digges, daughter of Charles Digges of Warburton Manor (Bowie, p. 249). It was during his ownership that the original house evidently burned, in 1771. It was not rebuilt until about 1783, by Clement Hill IV, the heir and only son of Clement III and Mary Digges Hill. Clement IV was appointed Commissioner of Tax in 1792 and again in 1803 (Van Horn, p. 217 & 242). The will following his death in 1807 left Compton Bassett to his wife, Eleanor Brent Hill, niece of Daniel Carroll, signer of the Federal Constitution, and of John Carroll, first American Archbishop of the Roman Catholic Church.

After her death the property passed to their son, William Hill, as specified in Clement III's will. William Hill was a physician and one of the organizers of the Planter's Bank in Upper Marlboro. He acquired additional land holdings here so that by 1813 the property was resurveyed as "Woodland" with 2,182 acres (Patented certificate #2392, Maryland Hall of Records). Compton Bassett underwent improvement in 1822, during the

ownership of William Hill. These improvements, including the application of stucco to the exterior, were done under the direction of James Hoban, architect of the White House (Hill family papers, letters bet. Hill and Hoban, 1822).

After the death of William in 1823, the Compton Bassett plantation was divided into five lots to be dispersed among the heirs. The house and 157 acres passed to his wife, Anne Smith Hill, and upon her death, to their son, William Beanes Hill (Bowie, p. 442-44). William Beanes Hill was a Judge of the Orphan's Court for twenty-five years, as well as being Secretary of the State of Maryland in 1862 and a State Senator in 1877. His other ventures, in addition to planting, included stockholder for the formation of the Maryland Agricultural College (the University of Maryland) and founder of the Woodland Bridge Company. He died in 1890.

In 1890 Compton Bassett passed to Esther G. Hill, eldest daughter of William Beanes and Catherine Beall Hill, according to her father's will (Administration #1413). She in turn conveyed the property to her niece, Mary Dixon Beall, upon her death in 1900. Mary married Dr. Reverdy Sasscer. Reverdy Sasscer practiced medicine here--converting the northwest room into an office,-- as well as operating a tobacco farm (partially tenanted). The two sons of Reverdy and Mary Sasscer, Henry S. and Robert B. Sasscer, later acquired title to Compton Bassett. Robert Sasscer, like his father, had a medical practice here. The surrounding farmland is now rented.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: Compton Bassett is one of the best extant examples of Prince George's late 18th-century Georgian residences. It displays the finely detailed elements that characterize the popular style of that period. It is comparable to His Lordship's Kindness--a National Historic Landmark--in architectural styling. Much of the detailing found in the exterior trim is repeated in the interior, such as the fluted and beaded pilasters, ceiling medallions, the dentils and triglyph-and-metope designs found in the cornices over the doorways, and the panelled doorway reveals.

2. Condition of fabric: Compton Bassett appears to be in good condition with much of its original fabric and detailing intact.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: It is a large, two-story, five-bay-by-one-bay residence with a hipped roof, facade pavilion and a lower, two-story two-bay-wide wing to the east side (L-shaped so that it has a hyphen-like appearance at the wall side).

2. Foundations: The foundation is brick covered with stucco and scored to resemble ashlar stone. It sits high (to the level of the first-story window sills), forming a water table.

3. Walls: The walls are of brick covered with pebbledash. The basement walls are approximately 2' thick and the partition walls are approximately 1' thick. At the west side are tie-rods held with star-pattern stays (three at the foundation level and two more near the center of the wall between the first and second stories).

4. Structural system, framing: The house is of load bearing brick construction.

5. Porches: There is a plain porch covering the south front entry. This is a 20th-century addition (ca. 1945). It has a flat roof supported in the front by two wooden posts with a balustrade to the sides. The stone steps are said to be original (and led to a stoop only). There is a recessed, hyphen-like area at the south front of the east wing with an entry portico set between the wall of the main block and the kitchen. It is supported by two squared pilasters with architrave trim, and has a flat roof with a balustrade around the top. Along the north rear of the main block runs a porch supported by six rounded columns with balustrade and low-hipped roof. It is enclosed with screening with entries to the center front and west side.

6. Chimneys: There are two interior brick chimneys to either side of center of the main block. They have corbelled tops and are covered with stucco. There is a similar chimney to the center of the kitchen wing.

7. Openings:

a. Doorways and doors: The south front entry to the center of the main block is surrounded by an Adams-style frontispiece. It is flanked by fluted and beaded pilasters with architrave trim, on the top of which rests a dentilled pediment. Between the returns of the pediment is a semi-circular fanlight with a keystone. To either side of the entry are narrow four-over-four-light sash, sidelight-like windows. The door is a wooden six-panel door. There are four recessed panels in the reveals.

The entry at the south front of the kitchen wing has a newer door with twelve lights above and cross rails below. It has a plain, narrow surround with a semi-circular fanlight only. Again, there are narrow, four-over-four-light sash, sidelight-like windows to either side. There is a second entry to the kitchen wing at the east side, covered by a shed roof hood.

At the north rear, the entry to the center of the facade has a simpler frontispiece than the south front. It consists of fluted pilasters, architrave, and a semi-circular fanlight only (no pediment). It has a wooden six-panel door. Once again, to either side are found the sidelight-like windows, this time with louvered shutters. There is one other entry at the west end of the north rear. It has a plain surround with a transom above, and a wooden door with vertical panels above and horizontal panels below.

b. Windows: The typical window of the main block is a nine-over-nine-light sash window, void of any ornamental surround, with a narrow sill. Over both the front and rear entries of the main block is a palladian-like window arrangement. It consists of a nine-over-nine-light sash window to the center with a semi-circular fanlight like those above the doorways (filled in at the rear), with smaller four-over-four-light sash windows to either side. As mentioned, the narrow four-over-four-light sash windows are found to either side of the main entries as well. In the pedimented top of the facade pavilion is a semi-circular lunette which

matches those found in the entries, and palladian-like windows. All the windows at the north rear of the main block have louvered shutters. The typical window of the wing is a six-over-six-light, double-hung sash window, also without ornamental surround. The four basement windows located at the south wall of the main block are slightly arched with segmental arches scored into the stucco. The windows are covered with wooden louvers. The basement window at the south wall of the wing is a rectangular three-light casement (without arch).

8. Roof:

a. Shape, covering: The main block has a low hipped roof (with a pediment at the pavilion front) covered with asbestos shingles (replacing the previous slate shingles). There is also a low hipped roof on the kitchen wing.

b. Cornice, eaves: The main block has overhanging eaves with a dentilled cornice. Dentils are also found in the pediment of the pavilion. The cornice of the wing consists of a plain board with a single bead near the bottom.

c. Dormers: There is a single dormer to the center of both the east and west sides of the main block. It has a six-over-six-light sash window and a gable roof with ovolo molding in the gable front.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

a. First floor: Compton Bassett has a center-hall plan with two rooms to either side, each with a fireplace to the center of the inside (east-west) wall. The center hall runs from front to back with entries at both ends. It is divided into entry and stair halls by an elaborate elliptical archway. Upon entering the front doorway, there is a doorway to a parlor on the west side and a doorway to a library on the east. At the north end of the stairhall, on the other side of the arch, there is a doorway into what is now the doctor's office behind the parlor and a doorway into the dining room behind the library. The stairway runs along

the west side and north rear walls. Under the stair is a doorway into the basement. The kitchen section is entered through the dining room of the main block.

2. Stairway: The stairway is an open-string, open-well, three-flight stair. It starts along the west wall, proceeds to a landing and turns and continues along the north rear wall to a second landing, turns again and continues along the east wall to the second floor. It has an elegant balustrade with turned balusters, two per step. The newel is formed by the spiraling balustrade. There are ornamental scrolled brackets along the step ends. Chair rail is found along the inside walls of the stairway.

3. Flooring: There are hardwood floors throughout. Most are the original random-width pine boards. There is narrow wood flooring in the center hall.

4. Wall and ceiling finish: The walls throughout are plaster, and are 12'-0" high in the main block. There is a plaster ceiling medallion around the light fixture in the front section of the center hall. It consists of a floral/leaf pattern with concentric rings. There is also an architrave cornice in the center hall. There is a chair rail in the parlor, library and dining rooms.

5. Openings:

a. Doorways and doors: The front entry is flanked by slightly tapering, fluted and beaded pilasters. There is a semi-circular light above, with a molded surround. The inside of the heavy front door is reinforced with vertical boards with a large box lock, and a doorbell to the center. The rear doorway has a narrow architrave surround, and a semi-circular light without surround. It has a six-panel door with a box lock. The elliptical arch which divides the center hall has the same pilaster treatment. There is a pilaster to either side and two pilastered columns between (where doors were once found). The arch is molded and has a keystone and an elliptical fanlight with tracery-like muntins. The inside of the arch and doorway have paneled reveals. The interior doorways off the center hall have elaborate friezes with a triglyph-and-metope pattern design. Above the

frieze is dentil and crown molding, above which is a fascia with medallions. The doorway has stepped architrave trim. There are wooden six-panel doors.

b. Windows: The windows have four-panel interior shutters which fold into the reveals. There are recessed wooden panels below the windows. The windows are surrounded by architrave trim.

6. Decorative features, trim: The fireplace mantels in the two front rooms, parlor and library, echo the pattern found over the doorways with the same triglyph and metope pattern. The other mantels in the house have a simplified design.

7. Hardware: Many of the doors still have box locks (particularly the front door where there is a large one).

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: Compton Bassett is situated on a high, wooded hill overlooking the Patuxent River which lies 1/4-mile to the east. It faces south, toward the river, with the driveway approaching from the north, around to the front where there is a circular drive.

2. Historic Landscape design: The house was designed to face the Patuxent River, with its back to the roadway. In the front yard, surrounded by the circular drive, is a planting of boxwood, also in a circular pattern.

3. Outbuildings: There are three outbuildings--the oldest of those standing on the property--which are of particular note. They include a Catholic chapel (see HABS NO. MD-135), a dairy and a meat house. The dairy and meat house form a symmetrical relationship with the main house. They are located to the northeast and northwest of the house, respectively, and on axis with each other.

The dairy is one-story, Flemish-bond brick structure, one-bay-by-one-bay with a gable-front roof and a one-story, rectangular board-and-batten addition (for the pump). The entry is to the center of the south facade with a plain board surround and a vertical board door. There are short arched windows with brick lintels to the

center of the north, east and west walls. There is a brick center chimney. The roof is covered with wooden shingles.

The meat house is similar. It is also a one-story, approximately 12' x 16', brick structure, but in a common bond pattern with random glazed headers. The gable front roof (also covered with wooden shingles) is slightly steeper in pitch, and in the gable ends are missing headers for ventilation. The vertical board door is to the center of the south facade, and there is a brick lintel.

The ruins of a former tenant house are located to the southwest. This was a one-and-a-half-story, small rectangular structure of timber-frame construction with brick nogging. It was covered on the exterior with board-and-batten siding and had an exterior end chimney which served a downstairs fireplace and upstairs stove (stove-pipe hole visible). Only the chimney end wall and parts of the other walls still stand.

Also on the property are a number of 20th-century outbuildings including a tobacco barn to the west. Clustered to the north is a gambrel-roofed two-story stable, a one-story frame cow shed, a shed and corn crib, etc. There is also a garage to the west of the house, near the chapel.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Early Views: Compton Bassett was photo-documented by HABS in the 1930s. It was first documented in 1936 by Delos Smith with a view from the southeast front. Also in (July) 1936, it was photographed by John O. Brostrup, with a view of the south front. Then, in May of 1937, Frederick Nichols photographed the northwest rear.

B. Bibliography:

a. Primary and unpublished sources:

Cook, Margaret W. (Prince George's County Committee of MHT). National Register of Historic Places Inventory-- Nomination Form, Compton Bassett, prepared 1976.

Prince George's County Land Register of Wills
(Wills as cited in text).

Weissman, Peggy Bruns (of Maryland Historical
Trust). National Register of Historic Places
Inventory-- Nomination Form, Compton Bassett,
prepared 1980.

b. Secondary and published sources:

Bowie, Effie Gwynn. Across the Years in Prince
George's County. Richmond, Virginia: Garrett
& Massie, Inc., 1947.

Van Horn, R. Lee. Out of the Past; Prince
Georgians and Their Land. Riverdale,
Maryland: Prince George's County Historical
Society, 1976.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

Documentation of Compton Bassett was undertaken as part of a cooperative project between the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) and the Maryland National Capital Park and Planning Commission on behalf of the Prince George's County Historical Preservation Commission (HPC) to document select sites throughout the county. A memorandum of agreement was signed in August of 1988 and the project, to span one year, began in January of 1989. The site selection was made by Gail Rothrock, director and Susan G. Pearl, research historian of the HPC. They also provided access to their historical research and information on file with the HPC, as well as their extensive knowledge of Prince George's County history. The large format photography was undertaken by Jack E. Boucher, HABS photographer. The historical report was prepared by Catherine C. Lavoie, HABS historian who also accompanied the photographer into the field for on site investigation.